

The Ritual Year and History



THE RITUAL YEAR 3

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PROCEEDINGS OF THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE
OF THE SIEF WORKING GROUP ON THE RITUAL YEAR

STRÁŽNICE, CZECH REPUBLIC
MAY 25-29, 2007

Narodní ústav lidové kultury

Strážnice 2008

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Cover design: Ian MacKenzie

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© Národní ústav lidové kultury (National Institute of Folk Culture), Strážnice

ISBN 978-80-86156-98-9

Editor: Irina Sedakova

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Emily Lyle, George Mifsud-Chircop, Annika Nordström, Lina Midholm, Jan Rychlík, Katya Mihailova, Elizabeth Warner, Nancy McEntire, David Stanley

Distributed by Národní ústav lidové kultury
696 62 Strážnice - zámek Czech Republic
Published by Národní ústav lidové kultury, Strážnice

Tisk: Tiskárna TG TISK s.r.o., Lanškroun
Vazba: Knihařství Hác, Česká Třebová

Proceedings from the
International Conferences of the
SIEF Working Group on The Ritual Year

The Ritual Year 1: Proceedings of the First International Conference of the
SIEF Working Group on The Ritual Year. Malta: Publishers Enterprises
Group (PEG) Ltd., 2006.
e-mail: contact@peg.com.mt
<http://www.peg.com.mt>

The Ritual Year 2: The Ritual Year and Ritual Diversity. Proceedings of the
Second International Conference of the SIEF Working Group on the Ritual
Year. Elanders, Vålingby: Institutet för Språk och Folkminnen Dialekt-,
Ortnamns- och Folkminnesarkivet i Göteborg, 2007.
e-mail: dag@sofi.se
<http://www.sofi.se>

The Ritual Year 3: The Ritual Year and History. Proceedings of the Third
International Conference of the SIEF Working Group on the Ritual Year.
Národní ústav lidové kultury, Strážnice 2008
e-mail: info@nulk.cz
<http://www.nulk.cz>

The volumes in the series are obtainable from the publishers at the addresses
given above.

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<http://www.ritualyear.com>
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The Neo-Pagan Ritual Year and Reinterpretations of History

This paper addresses the mechanism of historical reinterpretation at work in Neo-Pagan culture by examination of the Neo-Pagan ritual year and the relationship between the Neo-Pagan movement and historical paganism (i.e. pre-Christian indigenous religion).

The term Neo-Paganism denotes contemporary nature-based spiritual traditions. It is an umbrella term for a broad range of spiritual and magical beliefs and practices. Even the definition of this movement itself involves consideration of the relationship this modern movement has to ancient paganism.

Many of those who self-identify as 'Pagan' in contemporary times feel that they are followers of a religion that has its roots in the distant past; because of this belief, these people prefer the term 'Old Religion' or 'Ancestral Religion' to be used in reference to Pre-Christian Paganism. They feel it is a precursor to their own belief-system and spiritual practices.

It should be made clear that the use of the prefix 'Neo-' is in no way an attempt to detract from the authenticity or validity of contemporary religious traditions. It is employed simply to make it easier to distinguish between the contemporary movement and the historical religious traditions.

Neo-Paganism is a relatively recent cultural movement and particular 'paths', or denominations, within it have been classified by some scholars as NRMs (New Religious Movements)¹. It has been argued that many forms of Neo-Paganism have been established in comparatively recent times and that they do not have historically traceable antecedents. For example, Wicca, which is a form of modern Pagan witchcraft, was founded as a mystery religion in the 1940s by Gerald Gardner, who "was probably inspired by Margaret Murray's historical account of witchcraft as an organized pre-Christian fertility religion" (Luhrmann 1991:42-43). Murray, in her book *Witchcult in Western Europe* (1921), proposed that a fertility cult existed in pre-Christian Europe and that it centred on celebrations related to the seasonal cycles and pantheistic worldview. She claimed that the inquisition had twisted the symbolism of this older religion during the Witch Trials due to the belief prevalent at that time that magical rituals must be connected to devil-worship. Stirred on by this notion, Gardner set out to make what he considered to be a pre-Christian religion, ac-

cessible to people once again and named it Wicca. Academics refute that Wicca and other Neo-Paganism are historical. Despite rebuts from historical analysts, many practitioners feel that there are direct historical precursors to the modern forms of Paganism.

While Neo-Pagan movements were emerging in various countries from the 1960s onwards, and there were groups forming in Ireland throughout the 1970s and 80's, Paganism did not become visible on the Irish cultural landscape until the 1990s. In the Irish context, the majority of Neo-Pagan orders and organisations were founded in the early 1990s. Even though some groups and orders claim to be drawing on older sources of knowledge, this cannot be proven.

Projecting New Meanings onto the Past

Some Neo-Pagan groups identify their own spiritual tradition with that of an ancient "ancestral" religion and view themselves as the revivers of an ancient form of worship. There is an interesting process of attributing new meanings to the distant past. Many connections are made with the past, or at least with the notion of a perceptible pre-Christian religion having existed that shares something of the worldview and practices of modern Paganism, including the ritual acknowledgment of the changing seasons.

Four main seasonal festivals are celebrated by Neo-Pagans: Samhain on October 31st / November 1st, Imbolc on February 1st, May Day (*Bealtaine*) on May 1st and Lughnasadh on August 1st. The solstices and equinoxes are also observed.

The notion that these eight annual festivals were observed and celebrated in a certain way by ancient people has also been influenced by the writings of Margaret Murray and others. The belief that the system of holidays known as the "Wheel of the Year" has been celebrated by pagans in ancient times and onwards is part of what James Lewis (Lewis 1999:300) has called a "foundation myth" of modern paganism.

However this kind of matching up of presumed ancient Irish festival practices with contemporary Irish Neo-Pagan festival celebrations is tenuous as relatively little historical evidence exists on the religious beliefs and practices of pre-Christian people in Ireland or of the beliefs and practices extant in Ireland prior to the arrival of Christianity. The Neo-Pagan Wheel of the Year is similar in structure to the Irish folk religious calendar. However, the beliefs and practices connected with each calendar (i.e. Neo-Pagan and traditional Irish folk festivals) belong to substantially different contexts. Neo-Pagans may feel that they are celebrating the changing seasons in a similar way to how pre-Christian pagans did, but it is not possible to conclude this. The celebration of the changing seasons in Irish folk tra-

dition includes many customs believed by scholars to be ancient in origin but this is not to say that all aspects of traditional celebrations can be traced back to ancient times; many festival customs originated in pre-modern times or medieval times but do not have a pre-Christian origin. There is a tendency for Neo-Pagans to equate folk religious customs with that of pre-Christian religious customs.

Neo-Paganism is not the same thing as indigenous religion or folk religion. Even where a tradition has continued on in an observable and traceable way from the past, there are of course discontinuities between indigenous traditions and those of the modern Pagan movement. There is some durability in traditions, from folk practices of the pre-modern era into modern-day Paganism but this also involves much reinterpretation.

While many Pagans attempt to continue and maintain some aspects of older traditions, it is apparent that there is also self-consciousness with regard to issues of historical continuity and identity. There is awareness that it is unfeasible to 'revive' ancient religious practices *per se*, or even reconstruct accurately what older religions might have been like since so little information exists on indigenous paganism. Others are of the opinion that aspects of old religions, or at least those aspects that have been documented in even a limited way, can be revived and simultaneously changed to suit a modern mindset. Despite the fact that ancient paganism cannot be known about in any detail, people choose to carry on specific religious traditions that are associated with ancient religion, which they then modify to suit modern contexts. Discussing tradition in terms of his own group's ritual practices, one Druid says: "Some things of course we can't maintain [...] simply because they are not appropriate. It's not appropriate to take a life and dissect somebody's shoulder and have a look to see what's going on with the world (*chuckles*), you know? So in those things, you know, that's where Druids use change through the centuries, Mmm, but Druidry is always changing" (Interview with Mel)². The reference here to dissecting an individual's shoulder is an allusion to the ancient practice of *scapulomancy*, a kind of divination by means of observing the cracks appearing in a burning shoulder blade. It is believed that pre-Christian pagans would sacrifice human beings as part of religious observances; whether or not it is true that these kinds of practices occurred in the past, they would not be considered acceptable in modern-day Irish society and would obviously be illegal. Some Pagan groups and individuals choose to make symbolic references to these supposed older customs. For example, some people might have a "symbolic sacrifice" of a gingerbread man where the destruction and consumption of the biscuit represents the "death" of a figure that

stands for a particular aspect of life that the group/individual are letting go of on an emotional level. This custom would usually take place as part of a ritual at the festival of Samhain. This festival is seen as the marker of the new year by many Neo-Pagans and as such is viewed as a time when aspects that belong in the "old year" can be symbolically discarded. Thus, the crumbling of a gingerbread man as a representation of certain psychological features that an individual wants to be rid of is one example of symbolic sacrifice. Since Neo-Pagans often have a holistic worldview, which honours human and animal life, the idea of physical sacrifice or harm to a living creature would be very negatively received.

The past is often viewed in a selective way by Neo-Pagans. Many have a romanticized view of the environment in which pagans existed prior to Christian influence in Ireland and elsewhere. Many have rose-tinted notions of pre-Christian people as having a deep spiritual connection with the land, living in harmony with the natural cycle and worshipping the Old Gods.

There is a tendency to focus on idealizing a certain part of history and to leave out the elements that are thought to be "Christian history" from the romanticized version of the past. One example of this is the inclination of some Pagans to feel that they have spiritual ownership over particular historical phases. This attitude can be demonstrated in one Witch's description of how she "reclaims" what she views as a Neo-Pagan sacred site. The site in question is Croagh Patrick, a mountain named for Saint Patrick and said to be the 'holiest mountain in Ireland' (Dames 1996:169). The mountain draws a large annual Christian pilgrimage which is centuries old and it also has associations with pre-Christian religion and the pagan deity Crom Dubh. Carmel tells of climbing this mountain on "Garland Sunday", the day of the traditional Christian pilgrimage:

"On the Garland Sunday, Peter and I actually climbed Croagh Patrick [...] and I made a very special corn dolly and I put it in Patrick's Bed. I hope it has good dreams (*chuckles*) and re-dedicated the mountain to Crom Dubh. And, well it's a small way of reclaiming our history but I felt that that was important because all these people were climbing this holy mountain and not realising that it was a *Pagan* holy mountain *long* before it was ever a Christian one" (Interview with Carmel).³

A corn dolly is a straw decorative item that in folk magic has connections with fertility. By placing this object in "Patrick's Bed", a place on the mountain that was once visited by barren women in the hopes that they would be made fertile, is a way of emphasising the connections that the

mountain has possibly had with fertility cults in the distant past. The significance of the mountain to Christians is largely overlooked in her narrative.

The natural landscape and heritage sites, especially megalithic monuments, are chosen as loci for ritual practice because of their historical significance. Even though it cannot be known for certain how the indigenous cultures of Ireland interacted with the natural world or what sites they might have demarcated as sacred, there are still connections made between these megalithic sites and historical religious observance.

The correlations made between ancient religion and that of the modern-day Pagan spiritual movement seem to be intended to be poignant and evocative of certain religious ideals rather than suggestions of historical religious prototypes. For instance, many modern Druids use the term 'Grove' to denote the group with which they practice ritual. The word 'grove' can also be used in the sense of a copse. Classical accounts tell of woodland and forest clearings as being the loci for druidical practices and the term '*nemeton*' indicates a sacred place and particularly a sacred grove (Green 1997:108). Thus, intentionally adopting the term 'Grove' as a name for contemporary Druid groups resonates with the notion of ancient Celtic Druids practicing their religion in sacred woodland groves. Using the term 'Grove' has emotional value rather than being indicative of any historical evolution of Druidry from a long-ago era.

Megalithic stone circles and standing stones on the Irish landscape are favoured as sites for ritual gatherings. There have been instances where these monuments have been replicated in gardens or on private land for ritual use. These monuments are symbols of Irish heritage and the imitation structures with new associated meanings shows clearly how history is being reinterpreted.

Similarly, another commonly chosen location for the practice of ritual is that of ringforts, circular shaped settlements consisting of a round wall of earth or stone, often with a ditch outside (Harbison 1997:22). Some of this ringforts date to the first millennium of the Christian Era or later, while others date to the Iron Age or earlier (Ibid.: 24). In traditional Irish worldview, these sites have associations with the fairies and were believed to be the places where the fairy host resided. This association of the mounds with the fairies has been continued in Neo-Pagan worldview but again there is reinterpretation of the past – the fairies are viewed as 'spirits of place' and new meanings are attached to "fairy places". The fact that ringforts were human settlements for a period in history is ignored in favour of the folklore of fairies living in them.

Historical fact can often be pushed aside in favour of mythic history or an idealised version of the past that better suits Neo-Pagan sensibilities. Documented historical fact becomes less important for those who feel emotional connections with ancestral religion and culture. Some Neo-

Pagans claim that it is possible to sense and "tune in" to spiritual energies that are thought to still permeate sacred sites, such as megalithic monuments, in the belief that they have been used as ritual sites by pre-Christian pagans. It is subjective feeling and spirituality rather than objectively recorded historical information that is important to the practitioner. Whether or not the historical information is correct is of little importance to someone using the site as a spiritual resource; what is important is the believed connection the site has to a spirituality thought to have existed in the distant past. For some, carrying out rituals at these sites could mean that they practicing ritual in the same sacred space as their ancestors once did. To the Pagan mindset, the prominent factor is the association between these locations and the notion of pre-Christian Pagan religion. Speaking of sacred sites, one scholar states that: "there is no point in anyone denying the importance of special locations to those actively, and believably, involved in their appropriate ('correct') management ('treatment') at any given time, simply by arguing that their meaning may have been different in the past, or may shift again in the future. At any particular moment such places are vested with identity, an identity which involves both the supernatural sphere and the power of social self-definition and personal self-identity" (P. J. Ucko quoted in Carmichael, Hubert, Reeves & Schanche 1994:xviii).

The mechanism of identity formation and negotiation at work in Neo-Pagan culture, as with all cultural groups, heavily involves history as a cultural resource. Peter J. Fowler states that: "we shape elements of our present in the light of those parts of the past we select for imitation and emulation" (Fowler 1992:5). David Gross speaks of traditions that come into being "because they satisfy some internal, psychological, even visceral 'need for tradition'" (Gross 1992:64). Neo-Pagan traditions may be fabrications or reinterpretations of historical and even, as is often posited, pre-historical ritual practices, but there is an overriding sense that an adherence to such practices gives a sense of authenticity to modern-day practitioners.

Notes

- ¹ There are difficulties here in terms of categorization since not all Neo-Pagans view Paganism as a religion.
- ² Interview with Mel. *Ard Draoi* (High Druid) of the Owl Grove: 14.09.02.
- ³ Interview with Carmel: 09.12.03

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